



School reformers understandably focus on increasing the quality of academics as a key lever of school improvement efforts. Data support their efforts. It's clear, for instance, that helping low-income students enter and finish college is the most promising social mobility strategy policymakers have. Yet even a casual glance around at successful colleagues, friends, or impactful figures in American life shows that academics are only one part of the equation. Non-academic qualities such as grit and tenacity or social and life agility matter, too.

Schools can be intentional about imparting these skills, too. An excellent example is the MATCH Public Charter High School in Boston. MATCH is avowedly focused on preparing low-income students for college success. But in their efforts the school focuses on more than just academics. In particular, MATCH requires not only Advanced Placement course-taking but also requires students to take actual college classes at nearby Boston University. The goal of the courses is two-fold. First, by taking actual college classes in a live setting with actual college students MATCH students get an unambiguous look at what college level expectations and work look like. That alone is invaluable from an experiential standpoint. But there is a second dividend as well: Many students struggle. But instead of struggling with college work for the first time during their first semester of college – when they are also dealing with the adjustment to college, independent living, and so forth – MATCH students are able to struggle, fail, and learn to recover with the full support of the MATCH team behind them. It's really no different than the sort of training and support promising athletes receive from coaches or other elite practitioners in various fields receive. But it is unusual in education.

Paul Tough's new book "How Children Succeed" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012) looks deeply at how character traits matter and ways educators can think about them. ACT recently announced a longitudinal tool to help students and educators better identify, assess, and address key non-academic issues. For a company like Hobsons, that helps students think about post-secondary transitions and success, there is an opportunity to help them not only think about the formal characteristics that are on their transcripts but also the equally important informal ones that are not.

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