



HARD FACTS
on
Soft Skills

Helping Youth Catch Character Skills

Jostens[®]

Our nation and world are in the midst of sweeping economic and educational change. Today’s students will be tomorrow’s workers, who must find their way in an era of high-tech, global competition and unrelenting change. That’s all in a time when we worry about growing gaps between the haves and the have-nots in education, opportunities and earnings.

We responded by pressing students to learn and know more and better—and to show what they know on standardized tests. We created new curricula, instructional materials, assessments, mobile apps, professional development programs, school models and accountability systems.

These strategies are necessary but not sufficient. Along with learning math, science and other technical subjects and “hard skills,” students also need to develop the “soft skills” (or character skills) that give them the personal strengths to be effective leaders, workers, family members and citizens. Dozens of these skills, attitudes, and values—which we call “character strengths”—really matter. (They’re not really “soft.”) They include:



These character strengths are caught more than they’re taught.

- They’re caught through **relationships** with their families, teachers, coaches, mentors and peers.
- They’re caught when students **discover, practice and internalize** them.
- They’re caught when we **create expectations** that each and every student has value, can learn and grow and have something important to offer their families, their communities and the world, and **remove barriers** that prevent them from doing so.

When students catch these character strengths, they are ready not only to survive in a rapidly changing world. They are ready to thrive in it.

—Kent Pekel, Ed.D.
President and CEO, Search Institute

“ Character skills such as conscientiousness, sociability and curiosity “rival IQ” in predicting educational attainment, labor market performance, physical health and reduced criminality. ”

—Nobel Prize-winning economist
James J. Heckman

A Mixed Bag of Terms

“Character strengths” are sometimes labeled soft skills, non-cognitive skills, character skills, social-emotional skills, 21st century skills, and many other terms. In addition, they’re studied in many different disciplines, from educational psychology to behavioral economics to neuropsychology. But in the end, they all point to a constellation of personal skills, attitudes, values and mindsets that we’re calling, collectively, “character strengths.”

Character Strengths in Students

According to Search Institute surveys of 89,000 U.S. middle and high school students, here are percentages of young people who report key character strengths or soft skills:



Positive view of the future



Sense of purpose



Responsibility



Interpersonal competence, including empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills



Planning and decision-making

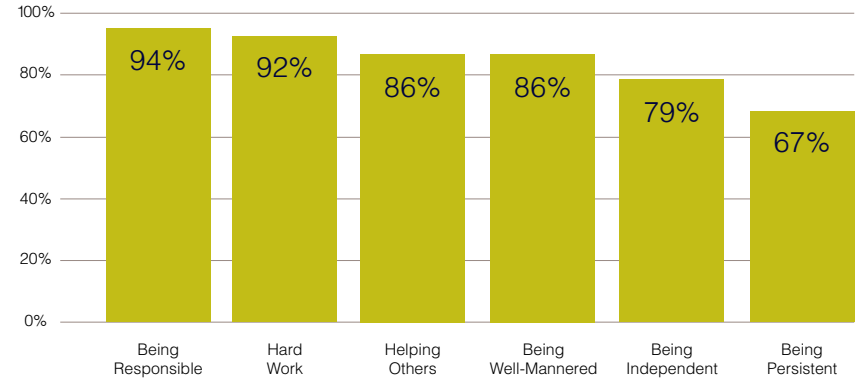


Integrity, or acting on convictions and standing up for one’s beliefs

What’s Important to Parents

Whenever the subject turns to character or social skills, educators may worry that they’re entering a dangerous conversation about beliefs and values. And, yes, some areas of character strengths cross those boundaries. However, there are core character strengths that U.S. adults from across the ideological spectrum believe are important to cultivate in young people, according to Pew Research Center.

Here are the percentages of parents (with children from birth through age 18) who say each of these character strengths is one of the top three that are most important to nurture in children (with little variation across the ideological spectrum):

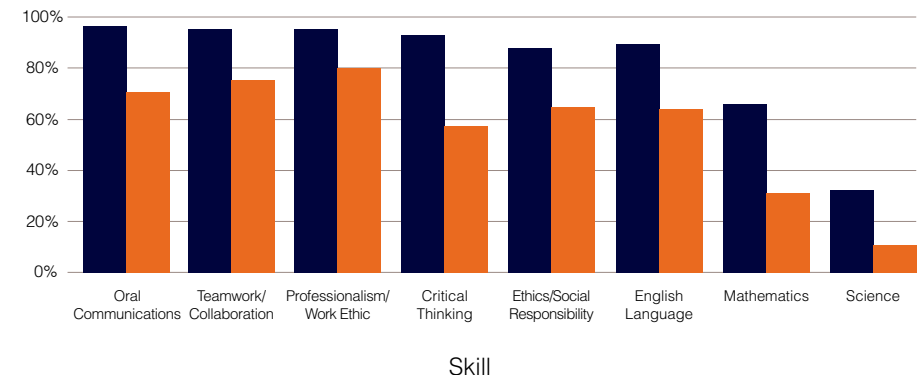


Some other priorities and values did bring out ideological differences between groups, such as the importance of faith, creativity and tolerance. By focusing on the areas where there’s a shared priority, schools and others can work together across differences in other areas.

What’s Important to Employers

The Conference Board asked more than 400 employers from across the United States what skills were very important for high school and college graduates to have to be successful in the workforce. Many character strengths ranked higher than academic knowledge.

■ “Very Important” for College Grads
 ■ “Very Important” for High School Grads



Critical Skills for All Types of Jobs

The U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network identifies 1,000 occupations and the desired worker characteristics for each. These occupations fit into 20 job clusters, such as business and financial operations; farming, fishing and forestry; healthcare practitioners and technical; sales and related; and production.

Character strengths are consistently viewed as critical across these many diverse occupations. For example, being conscientious or dependable was listed as the top-ranked soft skill for 14 of 20 types of jobs. It was ranked second for five of the remaining six types. Other high-ranking qualities include integrity, self-control, cooperation and analytical thinking.

The Motivation Factor

Academic motivation of many young people is lowest when they arguably need it the most: at the end of their high school years just before they transition to postsecondary education or the workforce. A variety of research highlights dramatic declines in enthusiasm, engagement and motivation for learning as students move through schooling—from kindergarten to high school and beyond. Particularly sharp declines are evident:

- During transitions to middle and high school;
- For boys; and
- For students from low socioeconomic, minority and immigrant backgrounds.

Growing evidence points to an intentional focus on nurturing soft or character skills through relationships as a powerful leverage point for rekindling enthusiasm, engagement and motivation.

If that's true, building relationships and creating opportunities that nurture these character skills and strengths may be a critical factor in addressing some of the vexing gaps in student success and opportunities that we seek to address in this society.

Small Things Can Make a Big Difference

Brief exercises that focus on students' thoughts, feelings and beliefs about education can make a big difference in learning—even helping to reduce achievement gaps months and years later.

When students...

- Articulate their visions of their best "possible selves."
- Are taught that their level of intelligence can be increased with effort.
- Learn to set goals and identify ways they would overcome obstacles.

Then they are more likely to...

- Become more engaged in school and care more about doing well.
- Be willing to work hard to master challenging academic material.
- Get better grades, have better attendance and experience fewer discipline problems.

Why do these kinds of seemingly simple activities matter? According to researchers David Yeager and Gregory Walton, they "change students' mindsets to help them take greater advantage of available learning opportunities."

Note: Future Renaissance Kits will offer specific tools that focus on these shifts.

A Different Kind of Smart

Sometimes we assume that the "smart" people are the ones who can win *Jeopardy* or who know all the answers on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. Those are the people who will "make it" in life. But research shows that a variety of character strengths or soft skills matter as much or more than IQ for success in school, work and other areas of life.

More than IQ, grade point average or achievement test scores, levels of character strengths (such as conscientiousness, emotional stability and self-regulation) during the teen years better predict the following in adulthood:

- Graduating from college
- Participating in the labor market
- Having higher earnings
- Not experiencing depression
- Avoiding involvement in the criminal justice system
- Being in long-term relationships

CLASSROOM AND TAKE HOME ACTIVITIES: BUILD YOUR CHARACTER TREE

This series of activities is designed to help students understand character strengths that are important to them, where they come from, how they develop and are grown, and what they can lead to. These can be used in a homeroom setting, or as part of health, social studies, language arts or other classes where they are examining human behaviors and interactions.

Five separate activities are included; they can be used together or individually. If using several of them, the recommended order is as follows:

Introduction: Conversation Starters

Students answer and discuss questions about hypothetical challenges.

Trunk: Friends, Family and Heroes

Students reflect on people they know and what character strengths they demonstrate.

Roots: Another Kind of Family Tree

Students investigate their family history and consider how ancestors' experiences have shaped family members.

Branches: Growing Character Strengths

Students describe their own character strengths, how they have developed and how they can continue to grow them.

Leaves: Where Will They Lead?

Students explore what character strengths can mean for their future, then discuss their ideas with peers.

Introduction: Conversation Starters

Character strengths can be hard to talk about in the abstract. So think of provocative questions and examples that stimulate hypothetical conversations that unpack character strengths and how students think about them. These can be used as icebreakers in classrooms or groups, during transitions between units or in informal conversations. What if:

- You have won \$1 million. What would you do with it? How would it affect who you are and how you see yourself?
- A friend asks you to shoplift a loaf of bread to give to a homeless person. What would you do? Why?
- You can choose three superpowers. What would you pick? Why?
- You have suddenly moved to a different country with a different culture. How would you adapt to that change?
- You have the power to be invisible for a day. What would you do, and why?
- You just learned you had only three weeks to live. What would you do? Who would you want to spend time with and what would you say?
- You have a chance to create a video game that shows your approach to life. What positive features will you include? What obstacles will you have to battle through?
- What do you want your legacy to be? In school, in your family, in your community?
- You have a chance to have dinner with three people you most admire from the past or present. Who would you want to meet? Why? What would ask them?

TRUNK: FRIENDS, FAMILY AND HEROES

Use the included worksheet as an in-class or take-home writing assignment. Give students a chance to think about what character strengths they value in others, then share in class or turn in.

Most students create a family tree during elementary school in which they try to reconstruct their genealogical roots, naming their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, cousins, etc. This activity stimulates a different conversation about a different family tree—one that focuses on identifying the character strengths that are part of each family and considers the experiences that helped form those strengths.

Step 1

Explain the purpose of the activity using the Introduction. Rather than going “up” the branches of the family tree, this activity focuses on the roots: What are key character strengths from their parents and ancestors that help them grow today?

Step 2

Ask students to have a conversation with parents or older relatives about stories from ancestors that describe or exemplify character strengths. They may want to bring home the completed “trunk” worksheet as a starting point for the discussion. Relatives will probably welcome the chance to tell stories.

Step 3

Encourage them to think about how these strengths from the past have shaped who they are today and helped form their own character strengths. For example, if they saw a grandparent work hard at a job and be satisfied with the result, this may have instilled a strong work ethic.

Step 4

Have them write an essay, or write three strengths and their background stories, or draw pictures of the events in the stories in a way that conveys the character strengths.

Additional Opportunities

- Ask each student to share one or two key character strengths that they have “inherited” from their families. Create a master list for the class (without identifying individual students) and display it in the classroom.
- Talk about the strengths that your class has when you all come together. Brainstorm ways the class might tap these strengths to help each other learn, grow and overcome challenges.
- Depending on the dynamics in your class, some students might appreciate the opportunity to tell their family’s story. Create opportunities during the coming weeks to hear from these students.
- Encourage them to create a small poster of “Lessons from Our Past on Taking Initiative.” Have them write down the top five lessons that can be found in the stories from relatives, then keep it handy where family members can find it when they need a motivating boost to tackle a challenge.
- If some of the relatives are still living, have students send them a letter or email to thank them for setting a good example, and share the student’s insights on how the character strengths were handed down.



Students use the questions on the worksheet to describe their own character strengths, where they came from, and how they can continue to grow them. Use as an in-class worksheet, or send as homework.

Additional Opportunities

As a class, brainstorm a list of at least 15 to 20 character strengths, or personal qualities and skills that people need in life. These can include honesty, perseverance, hard work, communication skills, helping others and many others. Write them on a whiteboard or on flipcharts. Students don't have to agree on all the strengths. Some will be specific to their worldview or beliefs, which is expected. Acknowledge these differences as part of our richly diverse society. Then, have students work together to identify five that they all agree are very important. You can do this through discussion, voting or other ways of reaching a consensus.

After completing the "Branches" worksheet, have students compare their work in small groups. What similarities and differences do they see between what they wrote? Challenge them to think of other ways to grow these strengths. Have each small group create a joint diagram that captures their shared ideas. If you have time, have groups share their thoughts with the whole class.

Use the "Leaves" worksheet in class to take all this exploration to the next level: why are these character strengths important and how will they impact each student's future? Have students discuss their responses in small groups or with the class.

A great way to motivate students to develop their own character strengths is to inspire them with examples and stories of others who, in extraordinary ways, exemplify those strengths. This series of activities—which you can adapt to fit the realities in your school—gives you an opportunity to recognize and learn from "heroes" in your school and community who inspire others with their character strengths. The key elements are:

1 Have students nominate others in the school community who they admire for their strength of character.

- Use a class, form a committee or use an existing leadership group. Be sure it is diverse and that they nominate diverse candidates.
- Include students, staff, teachers, coaches, volunteers, administrators and community members for consideration.
- Give them ideas by highlighting examples of character strengths. Consider having a nomination form that lists some key strengths, and have winners in different categories (an "empathy" winner, a "goal reacher" winner and so on).
- Have the nomination form include explaining what the person does to exemplify the character strength.

2 Develop parameters and select winners.

They can choose winners for a variety of reasons, such as:

- Being mentioned by a lot of students
- Having a particularly compelling story
- Highlighting an important, but unique, character strength
- Demonstrating that everyone has—and can develop—character strengths

3 Recognize the winners publicly.

- Give them the certificates and highlighters provided in the Renaissance Kit. Have an assembly or surprise them in class with a presentation by students or administration.
- Have pairs of students from the group interview the people selected about their strength and where it came from. Create an audio or video recording of the interview.
- Publish or broadcast the stories of these “Everyday Heroes” in the school newspaper, parent newsletter or website. Highlight them individually in the morning announcements. Emphasize the character strengths they model for others.
- Host a school assembly to honor these individuals from the school and community. Tell their stories and give them a chance to talk about what’s important to them about their character strength.

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