

# Building Life Skills to Increase Academic Success

The COVID-19 pandemic led to significant learning losses for US students.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the 2021 school year, students were about 10 points behind in math and nine points behind in reading compared to previous years, chronic absenteeism for students in Grades 8 through 12 had increased by 12 percentage points, and around 80 percent of parents had some concern about their child's mental, social, and emotional health.<sup>1</sup>

Life skills can help students begin to recover from some of these learning losses. Teaching students personal and interpersonal life skills improves their readiness to learn, creates a positive classroom environment, and increases their likelihood of reaching academic milestones.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

**Educators can help students reacclimate, focus, and be ready to learn by teaching life skills.**

- Life skills, which are sometimes referred to as social-emotional learning, help students make responsible decisions, manage strong emotions, and solve problems effectively.
- Teaching personal and interpersonal life skills in addition to academics has been shown to increase overall achievement.<sup>2</sup>

**Learning life skills helps create a more positive and productive classroom environment.**

- Research-based life skill-building in the classroom leads to:
- Improved student attitudes and attachment to school<sup>2</sup>
  - More positive social behaviors and relationships with peers and teachers<sup>2,4,5</sup>
  - Fewer conduct problems and risk-taking behaviors<sup>2,5</sup>
  - Less delinquency and fewer school-based arrests and other behavioral challenges<sup>6,7,8</sup>

**Ready-to-learn students and classrooms lead to increased academic achievement.**

- Students who participated in school-based life skill instruction:
- Experienced an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement<sup>2</sup>
  - Improved their test scores, grades, and attendance<sup>2,5</sup>
  - Showed an increased rate of earning high school and college degrees<sup>7,9</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

- **Incorporate** explicit, high-quality instruction on personal and interpersonal life skill-building into academic recovery efforts and college and career readiness efforts.
- **Provide** high-quality professional learning opportunities for educators on life skill-building instruction to help with student academic recovery.
- **Include** life skill-building opportunities in out-of-school time activities to reinforce skills across learning settings.

## References

1. Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2021, July 27). *COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning*. McKinsey. Retrieved May 18, 2022, from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>
2. Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405–432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
3. Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development, 88*(4), 1156–1171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864>
4. Sklad, M., Diekstra, R., Ritter, M.D., Ben, J., & Gravesteyn, C. (2012). Effectiveness of school-based universal social, emotional, and behavioral programs: Do they enhance students' development in the area of skill, behavior, and adjustment? *Psychology in the Schools, 49*(9), 892–909. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21641>
5. Farrington, C.A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T.S., Johnson, D.W., & Beechum, N.O. (2012). *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review*. Consortium on Chicago School Research. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED542543.pdf>
6. Piquero, A. R., Jennings, W. G., & Farrington, D. P. (2010). On the malleability of self-control: Theoretical and policy implications regarding a general theory of crime. *Justice Quarterly, 27*(6), 803–834. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418820903379628>
7. Kautz, T., Heckman, J. J., Diris, R., ter Weel, B., & Borghans, L. (2014). *Fostering and measuring skills: Improving cognitive and non-cognitive skills to promote lifetime success*. NBER Working Paper No. 20749. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w20749>
8. Almlund, M., Duckworth, A., Heckman, J. J., & Kautz, T. (2011). Personality psychology and economics. In E. A. Hanushek, S. Machin, and L. Wossmann (Eds.), *Handbook of the Economics of Education, 4*, 1–181. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
9. Coleman, M., & DeLeire, T. (2003). An economic model of locus of control and the human capital investment decision. *Journal of Human Resources, 38*(3), 701–721. <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.XXXVIII.3.701>